

## SIMITA – SIMULATIONS IN TRANSACTIONAL ACTIVITIES

### ABSTRACT

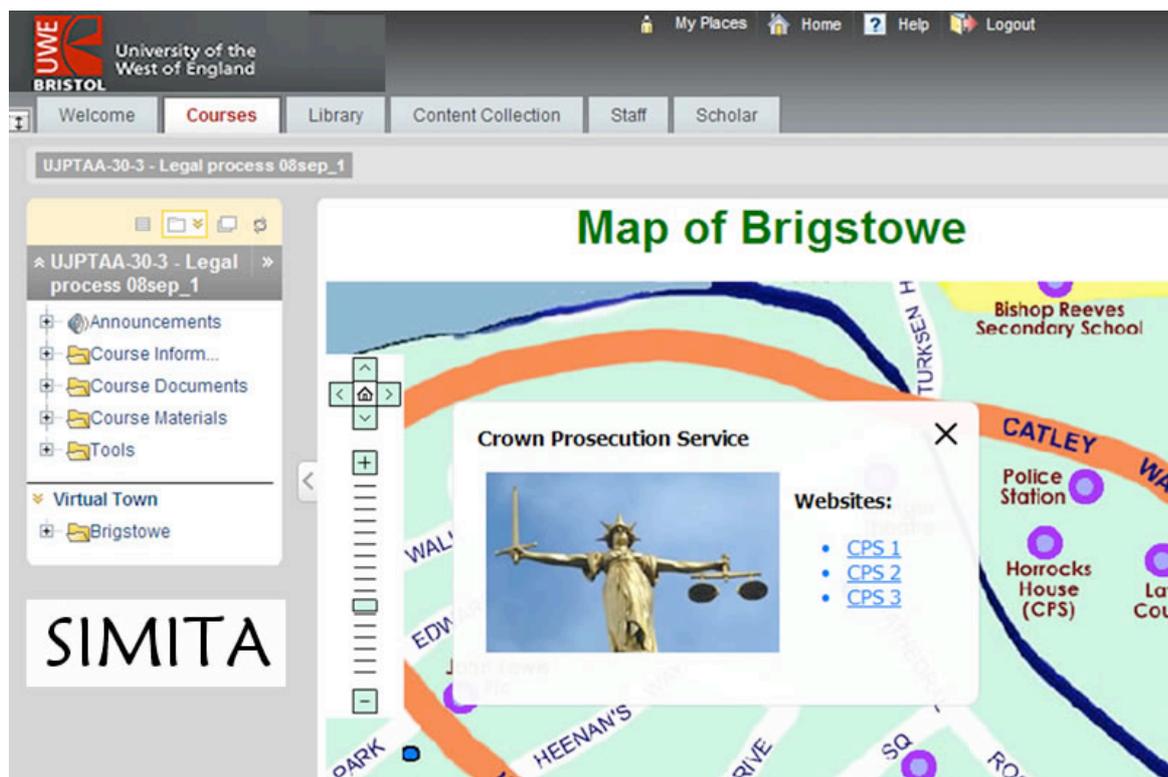
*SIMITA is a project that uses social collaborative online software to replicate a professional office environment where students can assume different roles and work in teams.*

### KEYWORDS

Simulation, role play, professional practice, team work, online collaboration

### CONTACT

Manuel Frutos-Perez, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, [Manuel.Frutos-Perez@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Manuel.Frutos-Perez@uwe.ac.uk)



**SIMITA platform showing the virtual town map**

### DESCRIPTION

At the University of the West of England we are piloting the use of professional simulations in the legal education curriculum and augmenting this teaching and learning approach by the use of technology to support the transactional process that underpins it. We are currently piloting this approach in the Legal Process Course. It is a final year undergraduate course that takes 24 students each year. A series of around 25 weekly three-hour workshops are largely devoted to skills acquisition through practice and reflection. The casework is conducted outside class. After the first few weeks of the course we ask the students to form 'firms' of 4 for the first simulation – a civil case. We have 3 simulations – claimant/defendant actions – running in parallel, using the same case scenario. The firms are asked to take the case as far as negotiation and reach a settlement. The groups are then dissolved and students form new groups for the second simulation – a criminal case, where 3 groups work for the Crown Prosecution Service and 3 for the defence. The criminal case ends in a mock Crown Court before a judge and jury.

### AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE

As explained above we are piloting this project within a final year undergraduate legal studies course. It is a cohort of 24 students divided in 6 groups. The project aims to create a pedagogic framework for embedding this type of learning activity in the curriculum and develop a technological platform to support it. Once completed, the project will be transferable for use in any course of a professional nature.

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The real practice of any profession in the workplace often does not follow a standard process. Professional practice is constantly faced by complex problems and indeterminate situations which practitioners have to unpick and define for themselves (Schön 1990). Theoretical knowledge is an important element of any professional curriculum, but workers undergoing further professional development need to understand the interplay between that knowledge, skills and values (Maughan & Webb 2005) in order to be able to apply that knowledge within the reality of their workplace. Professional simulations enable participants to experience and reflect critically on the problems and uncertainties of *real* workplace practice. Our approach to learning simulations involves inventing more or less complex scenarios and transactions for participants to work with and learn from. The focus on transactions is deliberate as so much of real professional practice is transactional in its nature; whether the transactions deal with information, goods or services. Professional simulations give context and meaning to theoretical models by enabling participants to synthesise them with their own experience; it informs their views of the *reality* of their profession (Frutos-Perez, Maughan & Tecks 2009).

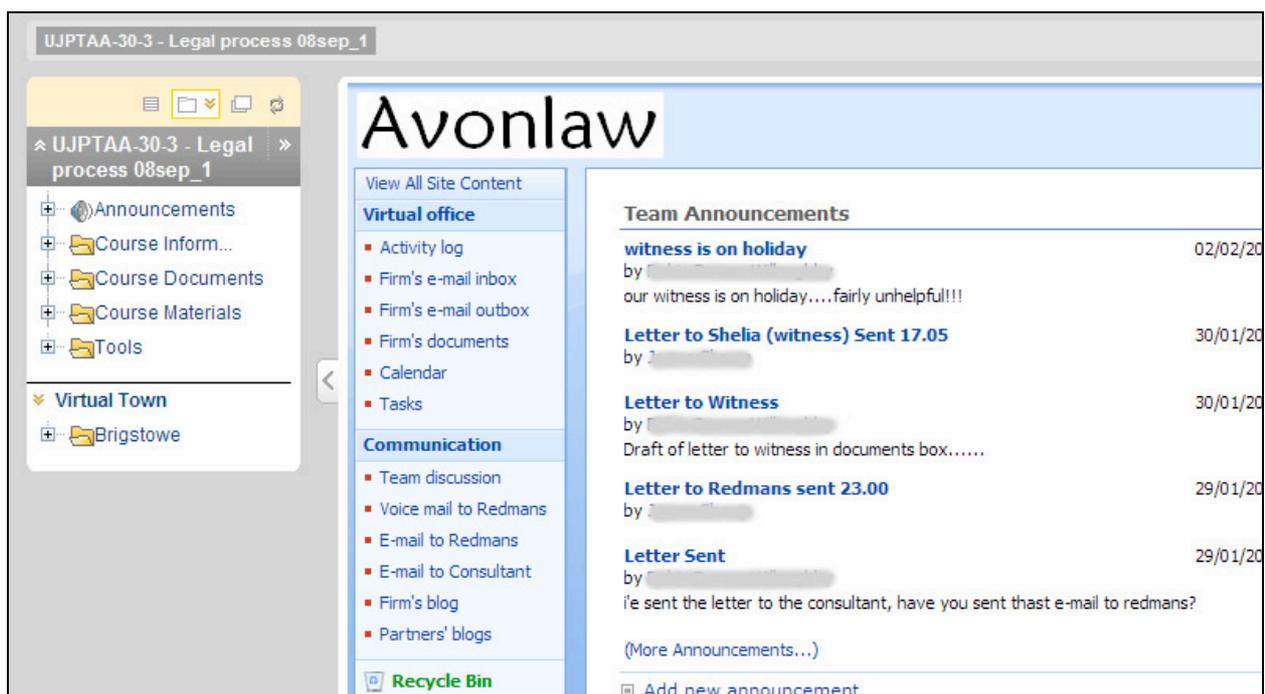
## TIME AND SETTING

As described above students are grouped in 'firms of solicitors' and they take on the role of 'partners' in the firms. Tutors play different roles in the simulation. Three simulations (following the same case scenario, a civil case) run in parallel from November to February. Then another three simulations (following the same case scenario, a criminal case) run in parallel from February to May.

## RESOURCES

We have developed the SIMITA platform, an Online Simulated Working Environment (OSWE) that fosters team cohesion and interactivity, and that allows us to support the simulations efficiently. The system is built on a set of technologies that are already in place and well supported at the university: Blackboard Learn™ (virtual learning environment), Microsoft Office SharePoint Server™ (content and communication management platform) and Wimba Collaboration Suite™ (collaborative multimedia tools). Thus SIMITA is not a new system, but a new conceptual deployment of existing learning technologies. This development model offers significant advantages in terms of resourcing, reliability and flexibility, and has enabled us to develop the SIMITA platform very quickly and grow it dynamically following the principles of the Learning Design model (Koper & Tattersall 2005). The design approach is purposefully student-centered, aimed at facilitating the experience of engaging with a simulation-based type of learning activity (for example, by devolving ownership and management of the virtual workplace environment to students as much as possible).

The SIMITA platform offers a location to store, generate, edit and update all the case documents and resources. Each student firm is given access to their own private virtual office. The platform offers effective methods of communication between firms, firms and tutors, firms with their clients and other parties. Directories can be used to assemble all the information that is collected – this is particularly useful when new characters are created ad hoc. It also features an interactive virtual town map that contextualises all the information that makes up the different cases that firms have to work on.



The screenshot displays the SIMITA platform interface for a virtual office named 'Avonlaw'. The interface is divided into several sections:

- Left Navigation Panel:** Shows a tree view of the site structure, including 'UJPTAA-30-3 - Legal process 08sep\_1', 'Announcements', 'Course Inform...', 'Course Documents', 'Course Materials', 'Tools', 'Virtual Town', and 'Brigstowe'.
- Header:** Displays the office name 'Avonlaw' and a 'Recycle Bin' icon.
- Virtual office section:** Contains links for 'View All Site Content', 'Activity log', 'Firm's e-mail inbox', 'Firm's e-mail outbox', 'Firm's documents', 'Calendar', and 'Tasks'.
- Communication section:** Lists 'Team discussion', 'Voice mail to Redmans', 'E-mail to Redmans', 'E-mail to Consultant', 'Firm's blog', and 'Partners' blogs'.
- Team Announcements:** A list of recent announcements with dates and authors (names are redacted):
  - witness is on holiday** (02/02/20) by [redacted] - our witness is on holiday....fairly unhelpful!!!
  - Letter to Shelia (witness) Sent 17.05** (30/01/20) by [redacted]
  - Letter to Witness** (30/01/20) by [redacted] - Draft of letter to witness in documents box.....
  - Letter to Redmans sent 23.00** (29/01/20) by [redacted]
  - Letter Sent** (29/01/20) by [redacted] - I've sent the letter to the consultant, have you sent that e-mail to redmans?
- Footer:** Includes a '(More Announcements...)' link and an 'Add new announcement' button.

SIMITA platform showing the announcements area of one of the virtual offices

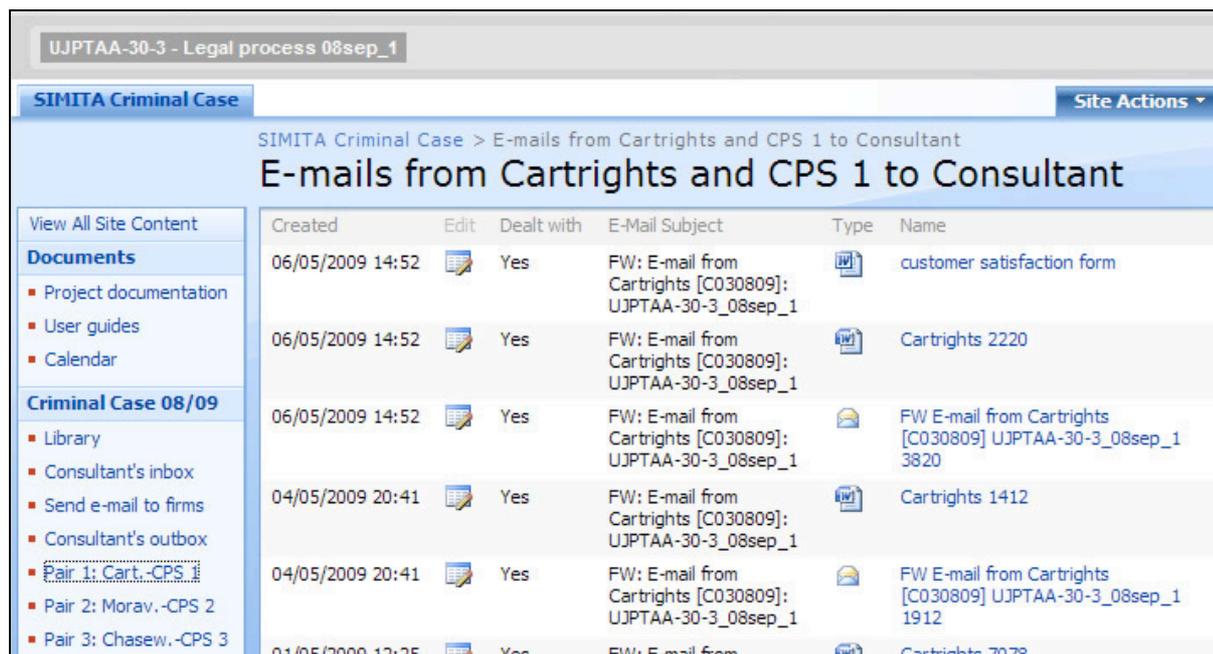
## ASSESSMENT

The Civil Case simulations are not formally assessed, so that students take part in the activities focusing on the process of dealing with their casework rather than the outcome.

The Criminal Case simulations form part of the summative assessment for the Legal Process course. Students receive marks both individually and as a team. Their individual performance is assessed based on their contribution as a partner of their firm. Their group performance is assessed based on a final case report that they have to submit (the focus is on applying case theory, ethical considerations, problem solving and reflection).

## FACILITATOR ISSUES

From the tutors' perspective, SIMITA enables them to monitor how groups and individuals within them are working. The tutor interface provides a high level view of all simulations that are running in parallel. It also provides the tutor with a central communication facility to contact and receive messages from all firms. The tutor can also access all firms individually to glean the detail of work being carried out by students. S/he can intervene in the simulation by contacting firms playing a particular role (client, witness, consultant, etc.). Those roles can easily be added to the simulation as and when needed.



The screenshot shows the SIMITA Criminal Case interface. The main heading is "E-mails from Cartrights and CPS 1 to Consultant". Below this is a table with columns: Created, Edit, Dealt with, E-Mail Subject, Type, and Name. The table lists several emails, including "customer satisfaction form", "Cartrights 2220", "FW E-mail from Cartrights [C030809] UJPTAA-30-3\_08sep\_1 3820", "Cartrights 1412", and "FW E-mail from Cartrights [C030809] UJPTAA-30-3\_08sep\_1 1912".

Created	Edit	Dealt with	E-Mail Subject	Type	Name
06/05/2009 14:52		Yes	FW: E-mail from Cartrights [C030809]: UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1		customer satisfaction form
06/05/2009 14:52		Yes	FW: E-mail from Cartrights [C030809]: UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1		Cartrights 2220
06/05/2009 14:52		Yes	FW: E-mail from Cartrights [C030809]: UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1		FW E-mail from Cartrights [C030809] UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1 3820
04/05/2009 20:41		Yes	FW: E-mail from Cartrights [C030809]: UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1		Cartrights 1412
04/05/2009 20:41		Yes	FW: E-mail from Cartrights [C030809]: UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1		FW E-mail from Cartrights [C030809] UJPTAA-30-3_08sep_1 1912
01/05/2009 12:25		Yes	FW: E-mail from		Cartrights 7078

**SIMITA platform showing detail of a tutor's communication with student firms**

## REUSABILITY

Both the simulation learning approach and the technology that supports it are highly transferable to any other subject domain with a professional angle. We also have plans to run interdisciplinary simulations with groups of students from different fields of study (e.g. health professionals, business managers, etc.).

## REFERENCES

- Frutos-Perez, M., Maughan, C., & Tecks, J. (2009). Simulation – The Great Pretender. *Association of Law Teachers Conference, 2009*, Association of Law Teachers, Amsterdam. 110-128.
- Koper, R. & Tattersall, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Learning Design: A Handbook on Modelling and Delivering Networked Education and Training*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Maughan, C., & Webb J. (2005). *Lawyering Skills and the Legal Process*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schön, D.A. (1990). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.